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3 THE COUNTY AGENT SPEAKS. 730

Problems in county agricultural work and its
supervision as suggested by representative
county agents in the Eastern States



For use in the Discussion Conference
on Supervision
Victoria Hotel, New York City
February 25-27, 1937



874771
The County Agent Speaks

In preparation for this conference on "Supervision" extension directors of the Eastern States sent letters to representative county workers to get their point of view on these two questions:

1. What do you consider your greatest problem in carrying out your work?
2. In what ways can your State leaders help you more in improving your work?

Thirty county agricultural agents from eight States answered. The following excerpts were taken from their letters:

- 1 "My biggest problem in a county where agriculture is highly diversified, is that of organizing my work so that I can take care of the many organizations, uphold my duties in connection with Federal measures, such as Agricultural Conservation Program, and still maintain individual contacts with our farmers. As long as I have an assistant with me, I find it much easier to conduct the work without losing these very essential individual contacts...

"I am looking forward to the day when our State Leader will be released from extra duties thrust upon him so that he will have time at least once a year, or better, twice a year, to sit down with me and go over my entire county program... Even though he simply approved the program I am conducting I feel that this action would give me greater confidence in the program I am conducting. Certain matters of policy might also be ironed out at such times. I do not offer this suggestion in a spirit of criticism for I know that our State leader has been tied up with emergency matters which require a lot of his time.

"I think State leaders should know at least a dozen of the leading farmers in each county and should be familiar with the major agricultural projects..."

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- 2 "...Our greatest problem is to get farmers who may need assistance most, to cooperate in carrying out our extension practices. Possibly, we have confined our efforts too much within our organized groups and have not paid enough attention to the outsider.

"Many farmers, who do not attend meetings, nor make any effort to receive assistance should be contacted and assisted in solving their problems.

"The State leaders and specialists could help by encouraging the county agent to do more personal contact work and assist in outlining a program for this diffident but deserving group."

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3 "... Due to the greater alertness and eagerness of the top third of the farmers, much of our extension work and programs has been for and with these farmers who need aid and advice the least.

"In this county last fall the County Fruit Program Committee decided that emphasis this year should be to reach the non-attending and lower income group of semi-commercial, part-time or small farmers. The HOW to reach these is the problem. Even local committeemen are at a loss as to how to do it.

"Would discussion meetings for those receiving financial aid from Resettlement help?

"Would personal calls at the farms of such people in order to analyze the outstanding weaknesses and suggestions for improvement for those not yet with Resettlement be of any benefit?

"What additional plans can be developed for assisting the low income groups with Soil Conservation? Here there could be a money gain appeal provided these people could be financed through Resettlement. One of the most frequent reasons for not completing projects under the 1936 program was 'Lack of funds or local credit'.

"Another problem is obtaining time and help from the Farm Management specialists in diagnosing farm situations. I have thirty farmers who have requested such a service, - assistance in properly evaluating the facts in the case - map of farm showing acres of fields; soil classification; inventory statement of income and outgo - statement of present marketing outlets and prospects. As a county agent I can get these men together - and later I might get time to visit each man. But I need help in developing the proper questionnaire - and in completing the job. Lectures help, but I firmly believe that the job is too big for most of these farmers to handle without some assistance. Can't we some way make the whole farm a demonstration?

"State leaders can help by preparing a handbook or manual to be used by county, community and project committeemen and by developing methods for conducting community committee meetings. What is the best method of locating and training local committeemen?

"State leaders can help more too by assisting in correlating Agriculture, Homemaking, and 4-H Club Work in the county. Is there lost motion? Is there overlapping? Can the committees of one branch assist those of another? If so, what and how?

"In each county there are certain peculiarities which differentiate it from every other county. The State leader, by virtue of greater vision, opportunity of studying other counties, could better diagnose the problems and assist in developing the best methods. Would local or county meetings be preferable? Should meetings be minimized and farm visits be increased? How about local study or discussion groups? Should these be increased? Are they the most desirable method? Is the cost too great? Do we reach enough people by this method?..."

4 "...it seems to me that one big problem here in the county is the need for more material in discussion groups. We could also use more information on the procedure in handling these groups.

"At present in conjunction with the Soil Conservation Service, we are holding a few such meetings, and the attendance has been good. However, we find it hard to get the farmers to enter into the discussion. I feel that these farmers have many questions in their minds which they would like to discuss. It is rather hard to get them to state their problems. If we could have some information on this subject both as to procedure of conducting the discussions and also information that could be used by various groups, we could help a lot in adult education along agricultural lines."

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5 "My greatest problem..is to find enough time in which to do the work which needs to be done. I recognize that this is a broad statement and that my problem is, perhaps, one of determining what activities should be stressed and what should be left alone, for maximum benefit to the agriculture in the county. The demands made by emergency and sociological activities during the past few years have greatly increased administrative work of the county agent. There has been a decided reaction to this in the county for the amount of time left for personal visits for service has been limited. This has caused criticism by those people who were accustomed in the past to see more of the extension agents on their farms. Farm management appears to offer the best approach to the problems of the farmer and in my experience personal contact by farm visits is the most effective method in initiating this work....My problem, therefore, is one of so arranging my work as to allow more time for farm visits while engaged in farm management work.

"... I feel that the specialists and leaders can be of more assistance in the assembling and summarizing of subject-matter material than in attempting to spend a large portion of their time in county work..."

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6 "... My greatest problems are to get farmers out to meetings, and to obtain cooperators who will carry out newly recommended practices.

"State leaders can help me improve the work in my county by spending more time with me in the field in their respective projects."

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7 "... One of the things that has bothered us considerably during the past year or so has been the amount of clerical work in the office. This seems to be increasing and it becomes more and more difficult to handle it...

"In contacting farmers and encouraging them to adopt better practices, probably the biggest hindrance is the lack of financial ability of these

men to adopt practices which appeal to them. The answer to this problem is difficult to find. During the past year, soil conservation has been a help and I assume that it will be a much greater one this year, now that farmers have become more acquainted with it. It seems as though it offers about all that could be expected in the way of financial assistance in adopting the practices which are covered by it.

"While I realize that it is necessary to check up on the amount of work that has been accomplished, it has always seemed to me that this phase of our work is stressed sometimes a little too much. Sometimes, in our attempt to get a lot of figures and facts down on paper, perhaps we forget just a little bit about the quality of the job that has been done by the farmers...

"...The number of different agencies that are looking for a chance to be of service to or sell something to these men is surprising to me. Some of the men are ready to take advice from everybody that comes along and others have become skeptical from taking advice from anyone...

"During the past year the problem of adjusting ourselves to the Agricultural Conservation program has been a big one and yet it is being accomplished. It was entirely new to farmers in this area and we had a late start in acquainting them with it. When we got right down to facts the opposition was not as great as we had expected, and with a little over 300 farmers receiving payments this year, I feel certain that many more will take part in 1937.

"... I would also appreciate very much receiving an outline of the material which the specialist is to present about two weeks before he arrives for the meeting. This would help a good deal in getting out publicity.

"I expect other county agents sometimes feel as I do that we are sort of between two forces which are pushing in on us all the time. On one side we have the State office and on the other side are the people in the county. When these forces get pushing in on us pretty hard, probably it is getting out of such situations that develop us and help us meet other similar ones."

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8 "The greatest problem we have in our county is to secure attendance of farmers at our meetings. I believe the attendance at our Extension meetings is the largest in the State and still we do not reach the number of farmers we would like to reach.

"We have used nearly every conceivable plan and the most effective is that of telephone calls by our local committeemen. But with from 103 to 131 names in three communities, all of which should be reached, it offers a problem that cannot be answered by telephone calls. We have tried to give due consideration to circular letters and have made an effort to measure their success. Sometimes a brief notice gets out a crowd while at other times few attend...

"The problem of reaching younger men appeals to me as one worthy of consideration. When the Smith-Hughes school gets through with them, the boys seem to drop interest for about ten years. There might be some system worked out for carrying their interest along from Smith-Hughes work to Extension work without this lapse of time..."

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- 9 "I believe my greatest problem is to find time to carry out the many things that need to be done. We should increase our efficiency. Specialists could help considerably by developing systems of filing and reference in their respective fields..."

"... Our State leaders should assist the agent in fitting his particular work in a sound program for the County. It is easy for a specialist to encourage his line of work at the sacrifice of other lines. We need coordinated programs."

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- 10 "My problem is how to keep informed on the latest technical information, also with personnel changes throughout the county. Along with that is the need for more hours in the day in which to supplement personal visits with letters and publicity regarding meetings, demonstrations, etc..."

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- 11 "...there seems to be confusion in the development of all lines of Extension work... Increased funds have added to the number of Extension specialists. They each have a job to sell and feel that it should be routed through the county agent's office. In addition, there are emergency programs, calling at least for counsel and direction and, in many cases, for a great deal of time. There is about one specialist to every two county workers in the field and the pressure from all sources makes the county agent seem more or less of a schedule bureau or exchange center, rather than one who has the opportunity to exercise real agricultural leadership."

"... By having fewer State specialists and demanding that those remaining discover the real problems confronting the rural people and then work out a few definite lines of development that might be carried on by the county agent. The State leaders and specialists must take the time to contact more of the farm people to find the real problems and not devote so much time to training leaders or meeting the few outstanding rural people in conference and attempting in this way to exert their influence on the agricultural problems. In some way they have got to keep their feet on the ground and know more about what is needed by the farm families on the side roads of our county."

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- 12 "... with sixteen years of Extension Service as a background, I find that there has opened up such a vast field of useful effort along varying lines that the biggest problem facing me as a county agent is to give proper balance to all phases of the work. As our commodity groups become better organized and take more active part in planning and executing programs, more time is required for committee meetings, conferences with individual leaders, personal letters, news articles, circular letters, method meetings, and relatively less time is available for individual farm calls...

"... I believe that State leaders should recognize the individual problems of a county rather than see all projects on a State-wide basis..."

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- 13 "The greatest problem in our work, as I see it after eight years of county agent work, is to find time to do the things we are expected to do. We tend to take on new activities and seldom drop any piece of work... I think one of our great weaknesses is failure to take time to carefully plan our activities for a period of six months or more... our State leaders have been carrying a larger load than they have carried for years. Emergency work or new types of programs which may be permanent are commanding more of their time and we are probably getting less supervision than we originally did. This puts a premium upon the initiative on the part of the county agent which is certainly worthwhile. Many of us miss the opportunity of sitting down around the table with one of the county agent leaders and working out the details of some particular program."

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- 14 "... one of our greatest problems is the organization of our work to meet demands of various kinds on the county agent's time and yet maintain close enough contact with the committeemen and the problems on the farm...

"With the volume of work we are now handling it seems increasingly important that we improve our filing system and our office management in order to have information readily available. Additional work along the line of office management would be very helpful.

"Possibly the greatest need for assistance is along the line of general professional improvement. We need to learn more about our job and new methods of handling our work..."

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- 15 "My greatest problem is to find time to do all the things which are expected of a county agent. We are constantly having more work pushed on to us by the farmers and by the State College without adequate provision being made for additional help within the county.

"I might also mention other "emergency work" such as debt conciliation, rural resettlement, emergency crop and seed loans, drought relief, flood

relief, rural electrification, etc. Just to read and digest the literature which we receive on some of these items is a considerable job in itself. Then, add to it committee meetings, conferences, publicity, reports, etc., and an agent has a full time job.

"We are instructed to make programs and plan our work. Yet, one of the main characteristics of the so-called emergency work is speed. If we do as requested, we have to drop our regular program and plans and rush to do the emergency work. What good are programs and plans if they have to be cast aside as soon as made?

"Perhaps my next greatest problem is too many bosses. I get supervision from my county committee and from the State office. It is the case of serving two masters at one time. Another problem is not having full authority in selecting my assistants.

"The State leaders can help me by giving more assistance and less supervision. I want to be shown how to do my work easier, quicker, and better; not shown more things to do..."

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16 "One of the greatest problems is the failure to reach many of the farmers who need help most. Evidence of this problem is the small attendance at many meetings. Often it is only the most progressive men who attend.

"I am wondering how effective our circular letters are...

"Program planning has always been a problem. I have tried to get the committeemen to develop the program. They think in terms of activities rather than problems and solutions and often times do not view the program from a long time standpoint. While we have had good programs, I have the feeling that the committeemen and farmers think the program is drawn up in the office...

"Our State leaders are doing a good job in helping us improve the work in our counties. Training schools to keep the agents up to date on subject matter have been most helpful."

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17 "One of the big problems is lack of time to plan our projects and carry them out as we should like to. Another is to get attendance at meetings. While we are spending more time writing circular letters we still do not get too good an attendance at our meetings; perhaps we are not making the right approach.

"One of our biggest problems is lack of information about hundreds of different practices, such as pasture improvement, new insects and how to control them; and even common things like proper fertilizers for many crops.... We are forced to tell growers many times a day that we do not

know the answers and do not know of any work being done on these particular projects, and although we have asked for it we do not know when it can be carried out.

"One of our other problems is that of getting answers to letters. Specialists at our College of Agriculture have to spend so much time in the field they do not have time except on Saturdays or Sundays to answer our correspondence.

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- 18 "One of the greatest problems we have is lack of personnel to carry out the county program as it should be conducted. We will have over 1,000 members in 1937, the most of whom will require services on the farm such as soil testing, poultry disease control, poultry house ventilation, land drainage, pasture improvement and dozens of other such important services. Besides the regular members there will undoubtedly be almost as many more non-members requiring similar services. There is of course a great amount of organization work to be done besides rendering such service. Lack of funds prevents employing an assistant...

"I think we spend too much time in helping with the membership campaign, when most of this time might be spent to better advantage.

"Emergency programs have interfered in late years with our regular county program. Lack of personnel has again forced us to abandon our regular work to carry on the emergency programs."

"... we should have more information brought to us by our State leaders on successful methods being used in other States by other extension men. We do not receive enough of this..."

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- 19 "The greatest problem for county agricultural agents in carrying out the work in their county is in methods as opposed to subject matter... Another problem is to effectively and economically measure results...

"I believe the field of visual instruction has not been used as much as it should be. State leaders could be of real service in helping to prepare film strips with a local appeal..."

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- 20 "One of our problems is to learn how to use our time more efficiently. We usually have from 500 to 1000 cooperators and in order to give any of these enough time to accomplish very much in the way of changed practices, we need to know how to do things more efficiently. It usually works out that the ones who are the best cooperators get the most of our time. This comprises about 25% of the group. As a result, the other 75% get little attention and receive little help except indirectly through their neighbors...

"... as yet we have no very efficient way of analyzing problems and working out a program that means much to our local leaders and the county executive committee..."

"The third thing which I should like to mention is the problem of security of our job as county agent. While I have been in the work over fifteen years, yet there still seems to be a great deal of lack of security in the job..."

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- 21 "... Due to the fact that a large percentage of our farmers are of foreign birth, and in many instances, unable to speak, read, or write the English language, they are difficult to reach and slow to adopt changes of practice. This situation will eventually work out for large numbers of the children of these farmers are in 4-H club work....

"... The price of fluid milk has been low for a long period resulting in small incomes on our dairy farms, which works against the adoption of many practices and projects that farmers themselves recognize would be desirable..."

"Service to young people between the ages of 18 and 30 is one of our greatest problems - to present a program and tie into our work the young men and women who have become too old for club work and yet are not old enough to take part in the adult work."

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- 22 "There are absolutely too many projects listed in the program. It is not humanly possible to carry out the program in its entirety and accomplish anything over and above mediocre results. An area comprising a diversified agriculture necessitates a varied program, but this should be confined to the major problems."

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- 23 "My problems are: difficulty of obtaining local leaders to assist in carrying out the Extension projects; getting cooperators to report results; getting group action--natural tendency to keep problems to themselves--jealousy among farmers; other competing interests have a tendency to lower attendance at Extension meetings; difficulty of obtaining men as Directors of the county organization who will develop increased interest in Extension..."

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- 24 "The problem which concerns me most is a full realization that we have become administrators in the adult educational field, a situation which demands rapid self-adjustment, resulting in a feeling of total loss at certain times. During the first ten years of my county agent experience, the big problem was to adapt results of research to the county's agriculture and present the findings to farmers... During the past two years, the problem

has been to organize my office to carry forward these regular functions and at the same time assist the Agricultural Adjustment Administration in a dozen or more ways in matters heretofore considered foreign to our field...

"... At this time, however, the industry is becoming more settled and the farmers are again evidencing an interest in long-time planning...

"... As we move into this period, State leaders can help tremendously in keeping us informed of developments and assisting with plans more carefully worked out so they can be presented to the farmers in less time than has formerly been given to the respective lines of work.

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25 "... our difficulties are: lack of time to devote to complete definition and analysis of both our problems and our county plan - even while recognizing that both our problems and our plan must be ever changing to keep abreast of changing conditions; lack of sufficient economic data; lack of coordination among Washington Bureaus (in this connection may I say that the recent publication "Looking Ahead On Agricultural Planning" in which representatives of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the Soil Conservation Service and the Resettlement Administration, gave joint expression to their views on certain economic and social factors bearing on agricultural adjustment; is to my notion the most significant and forward looking development in recent years). This significant action in Washington should be the forerunner of similar group planning in the State offices - although we must in all fairness admit that our specialists have cooperated splendidly in planning their projects.

"... My reaction is that the statistical report is a time consumer and is not worth what it costs...

"I have no further suggestions to offer regarding leadership other than the coordination of planning among the specialists so our county plans may adequately recognize county problems.

"... our farmers will follow if we can provide the practical county plan and can so coordinate our activities whether they belong to the Agricultural Conservation program, farm management, reforestation or what not - so that worthy effort in any line will be recognized and fitted into the coordinated attack on the economic problems of the farmer."

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26 "My greatest problem is the lack of man power and time to do an efficient job on all of the complex problems.

"The agents in this section have organized an outline of extension work in the various major commodities and have presented the same to the central office for study and definite action. Out of this study we hope to see

emerge a definite program where department heads, specialists, research men and agricultural agents have a definite part to carry out... By doing this we hope to eliminate duplication of work in several counties where conditions are practically identical and the problems the same. All this means is that it calls for cooperation of the whole Extension and Experiment Station forces from specialists to county agents to get the answer to the problem involved and present the same to the farmers in a practical way...

"The results obtained again depend on the answer to your first question as we, in the field, are only human - there are only twenty-four hours in the day and the problems presented are many."

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27 "The last two or three years has seen such a change in the things that a county agent is expected to do that most of us are not quite sure what our greatest problem is. Factors over which we will probably have very little control will determine whether we are to continue as primarily educational agents or become largely administrators.

"... our problem from an educational standpoint is to sift out the various programs offered by the specialists at the college and to develop a program fitted to the county we happen to be in. This involves developing leadership in the county that will assist us in determining a wise program and also in carrying it out. Doing this is greatly complicated in counties having a wide diversity of agricultural interests.

"... our problem is to develop a program best suited to the agricultural problems of the county rather than one that is made up of parts of the programs of various specialists. At the same time the county agent and his leaders in the county must view the county program in its relation to the State and national picture. We must deal in present problems, but have a long time view, and must remember above all that the individual farmer must be able to translate the program into a solution for some of his own problems.

"... We have developed a wonderful body of voluntary leaders. I hope we continue to have their support and I am quite sure that we are going to continue to need their aid in developing and carrying out an agricultural improvement program of which the Agricultural Conservation Program will be an important part.

"Lastly the ever present problem of all of us is the fact that there is always more to be done than any individual can possibly do.

"... If the county agent is supposed to be a man of action the county agent leader should be the opposite. Certainly he should maintain contacts in the field, but his greatest value to us should be the analysis and constructive criticism of our activities. Such analysis takes uninterrupted time which most of us seldom have.

"Sometimes I wonder if our reports are read. For many years I have never had more than an acknowledgment of the receipt of the annual report.

I think if some of us were actually made to defend our course of action we might think through our programs to a greater degree. County agents like other people in public life, and out, sometimes get in a rut and our leader should see to it that we do not stay there..."

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- 28 "My greatest problems are: To maintain interest and support of the local organization against the many competing agencies that are using similar extension methods commercially; making meetings of sufficient interest to compete with numerous social interests, radio, other organization meetings, and farm visits of salesmen; if agricultural conservation is to be sold by farm to farm calls and farmers paid in cash a considerable part of cost for adoption of approved practices, how can we extension agents tie into this work to do the most good and yet maintain our organization..."

"State leaders can assist by: continuing help in developing leaders capable of sound thinking beyond the first bend in the road; and by helping coordinate the work without allowing county workers to be overshadowed..."

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- 29 "The greatest problem is the inability of the staff to satisfy the extension membership and yet have sufficient time to properly organize and carry out the extension program.

"A definite program of work for each project if submitted to the County Commodity Committees for approval would be much more valuable than attempting to get a program made up by farmers alone even with the guidance of agent or specialist. The pressure and influence of a few men often tends to demand too much time from a specialist or agent at the expense of the minority. The program should include not only help to the commercial men but give all farmers an opportunity to an equal assistance.

"Another improvement would be more news articles from State leaders for publication within the county. This, in turn, would give the agent more opportunity to organize the work more efficiently by lessening the burden of writing news articles.

"Additional training of each specialist in outlining the long-time objectives would indeed facilitate a better understanding among leaders. Even though a specialist in one field he should be equipped with the information and convinced of the objectives in other fields as well."

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- 30 "... In commenting on the interruptions and extra duties, I will say that I very much like to have these new phases come along because they force us to meet new problems and bring us into contact with people with whom we had not been working previously..."

"Perhaps because of these interruptions and extra duties, we would get further if we limited our regular work to only one major project in a year, but a question which that immediately brings up is whether this would be fair to the other groups interested in different types of agriculture.

"... I believe that our specialists could help us tremendously by having a little bit more fire, enthusiasm and pep in presenting the subject matter which they bring to the county - also more that is new.

"I think possibly we have built up a wrong habit by taking the State specialists into direct contact with farm people of the county. What I have in mind is that their time might better be used in training definite volunteer leaders who might put over the work after having been instructed in the subject matter by the specialists..."

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